

The Problem with Paul – Sermon #2: Paul and Marriage
Ephesians 5: 21-33
Sept. 28, 2003
Kory Wilcoxson

What's Paul trying to say when he spends three verses instructing wives and nine verses instructing husbands? Guys, should we be offended? It's funny, we usually always hear the first part about wives submitting to their husbands, but we rarely hear the second part about what husbands should be doing. What should we make of that?

This is the second sermon in our series looking at the problem with Paul. Last week we tackled Paul's view of women, and we started with the notion that trying to bring Paul's ancient words into our modern world is like trying to cross a shaky bridge. In order for us to fully understand Paul's words, we have to be willing to go back across the bridge and hear their words in his context and culture, not just in ours. This applies just as much to our passage today.

Before I explore that further, I need to offer an apology. Today's sermon is going to focus on marriage, so it will necessarily exclude those of us who are single, divorced, or widowed. This does not mean, however, that Paul has nothing to say on the matter. In fact, Paul himself was single. He calls being single a "gift from God," and praises the single person for being able to better focus on doing God's work without the...ahem... distraction of marriage. So I apologize in advance for focusing exclusively on marriage, but I want single folks to know they are loved and respected, and that hopefully today's message will have something to contribute to all our relationships.

After a wedding, a minister patted the groom on the back and congratulated him, saying, "God bless you, son. You're at the end of all your troubles." A year later the man called the pastor furiously angry and screamed, "When you married me, you told me I was at the end of my troubles!" And the pastor calmly said, "That's right, but I didn't say which end."

Marriage is hard work. It takes stamina, endurance, and the ability to compromise...and that's just planning the wedding! When you attempt to take two individual lives and weave them together into one, you are bound to run into a few snags. That was as true in Paul's time as it is in ours, which is why we have Paul's instructions on marriage.

Before we try to make sense of his words, we need to travel back across the bridge to view marriage in Paul's time. As I said last week, women had a very low social status within the Greco-Roman culture and were seen as inferior in every way to men. In a marriage, the man was seen as the head of the household, and the woman was considered on equal plane with the children and slaves, but no higher. Paul never puts down the value or intelligence of women, but he does presume this household hierarchy that was universally accepted in his day. The man was the authority of the house, and women were expected to operate within this understanding.

Now initially, it sounds as if Paul is reinforcing this hierarchy with his instructions. But Paul has a much more important agenda here, and it is one that is so radical and revolutionary it would redefine the understanding of a relationship between a man and a woman.

A lot of jokes are made about wedding vows that call for the woman to “love, honor and obey” her husband. You may have heard that, but I’ve never performed or been to a wedding where that line was used. And Paul never calls for that, although he often gets the blame. What Paul calls for is submission, which is a much different thing.

Paul calls for wives to “submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” That last part is sometimes omitted, but it is crucial to our understanding of Paul’s words. Submission to Christ was one of Paul’s most important aspects of Christianity. Submission simply means to give ourselves over to the other person, to serve them with all our hearts. It’s the same model Paul sets for himself when he identifies himself as a “servant of Christ.”

What this understanding of submission does is situate Paul’s comments to wives in a larger context of his thought, where service, obedience, and self-sacrifice were required for both men and women. This is not culturally enforced submission; this is not erasing your entire self-worth and identity. With Paul, submission is transformed from societal expectation to a mark of faith. Christ submitted his will to his father, and we’re called to do the same. If we are genuinely concerned for the happiness of our spouse, our submission to them is a natural part of that, for the man or the woman.

Let’s return to our bridge for a second. To bring Paul’s words across to our side, they have to be translated from their original Greek, and a lot of times there is meaning lost in the translation. As an example of the difficulty of this, let me offer an alternative reading of these verses, which comes from The Message:

Now, even after those words of explanation and re-translation, you may be upset by the instruction of wives submitting to their husbands, and if you are, I don’t blame you. In some ways they just don’t make it across the bridge in a way that makes them palatable, and we’re stuck with them as is. So let’s turn instead to Paul’s instruction to the husbands, which may shed some more light on this and steady our bridge.

In the Greco-Roman culture, there were no limits placed on husbands and their authority. No one told them how to treat their wives, so we can only imagine the types of abuse and degradation that took place. The woman’s role in the marriage was primarily that of breeder so that the man could pass on his legacy to his male children. There was nothing that called for respect or love or protection for the wife.

Paul’s words turn all of those unwritten societal laws on their ears, and would have been heard as a radical departure from the norm. And yet, his words fit in perfectly with our understanding of Christian values. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The word Paul uses for love here is “agape,” which is a selfless, sacrificial kind of love. Paul says, “Husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies,” and “he who loves his wife loves himself.” The authority Paul is giving husbands here is not based on domineering or intimidation; it’s based on sacrificial love. In other words, husbands should look at how they treat their wives and then stop and ask themselves, “Is this how I want to be treated? Is this how I want to be loved?”

As we try to bring Paul’s words across the bridge, here’s what we have: (1) husbands, be willing to sacrifice everything for your wife; (2) husbands, make your wife’s well-being your primary importance, and (3) husbands, care for your wife as you care for your own body. No wife would fear submitting to a husband who treats her this way, because this represents service and submission on the husband’s part, as well.

I believe the reason this passage has caused women so much pain is not Paul's words, but how they've been misused. These words are sometimes brandished as a weapon to force women to submit to their husbands no matter what "because it's in the Bible." Wrong. But Paul doesn't say "no matter what" here. Submission does not mean becoming a doormat to be stepped on. Paul does say that wives should submit to their husbands in everything, but he also states very clearly that a husband's authority should mirror Christ's authority. Paul is not requiring wives to accept degrading or harmful forms of submission, and verbal and physical abuse are not in any way on Paul's radar screen of what a husband's authority should be. Paul calls for submission out of love, not out of fear, and any exercising of harmful authority would go directly against what Paul is saying here and is extremely un-biblical.

When this passage has been misused, and that's happened way too much in churches down through the years, it's an example of taking one or two verses out of its context and applying them to a certain advantage. Of course domineering husbands are going to quote Paul's instructions to wives, and of course they're going to leave out his nine verses to husbands! But we have to take them together, because to understand one set of instructions, you have to understand the other. They cannot be separated.

A wise person once said that more couples would celebrate their golden anniversary if they first followed the Golden Rule. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. Husbands love your wives as much as you love yourselves. And in all things, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. And they lived happily ever after.